



COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION & LABOR
REPUBLICANS

COMMITTEE
STATEMENT

Opening Statement of Rep. Bradley Byrne (R-AL), Republican Leader
Subcommittee on Workforce Protections Hearing:
“Breathless and Betrayed: What is MSHA Doing to Protect Miners from the
Resurgence of Black Lung Disease?”
June 20, 2019

“As the name of this subcommittee suggests, we all share the common goal of keeping hardworking Americans out of harm’s way at their jobs. We want to help ensure that all workers return home to their families safe and healthy.

Workers in the mining industry have been an extremely important part of the American economy for decades. As someone who comes from a coal mining state, I have been a strong supporter of the men and women who provide for their families by working in this industry. I want us to do everything we can to ensure their safety is protected. As such, it is essential that federal programs designed to provide benefits to these workers are effectively managed to ensure that promised protections and benefits are available, now and in the future.

The Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) is responsible for protecting American mine workers by establishing and enforcing safety and health regulations governing all above-ground and underground mines. It is vital that MSHA maintain high standards of safety, while also allowing the industry to innovate for the benefit of mine workers and the American economy.

In 2018, MSHA reported more than 330,000 Americans were employed by the mining industries, and that same year the agency reported the second lowest number ever recorded of mining fatalities. However, one fatality is still too many, and we need to continue promoting the best possible policies to ensure a safe and healthy workplace.

When discussing the safety of mines, we cannot forget about the hazards whose effects might not be visible until years later in the form of illnesses such as black lung disease. This illness has lasting effects that can devastate workers' bodies and make life more difficult and painful.

Today we will hear from witnesses sharing their stories about some of these hardships, and I want to thank you for being here to provide your testimony. We all share a common goal of preventing and eliminating black lung disease. I look forward to hearing from both panels of witnesses on how we can best accomplish this goal and ensure those already diagnosed with the disease are receiving the proper benefits.

I am encouraged by the Trump administration's work in this area and its latest regulatory agenda, which includes a request for information on respirable crystalline silica. It is critical for the agency to determine if the current respirable dust standards are providing the best and most feasible protection for miners.

However, I think this hearing is missing a crucial voice in the examination of black lung benefits by not including the director of the Office of Workers' Compensation Program (OWCP) here to testify today. As you know, this Committee is responsible for oversight of OWCP at the Department of Labor, which administers benefits for the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund and plays a key role for miners who are Trust Fund beneficiaries. Funding for the Trust Fund, however, is provided by an excise tax on coal. While that excise tax falls under the jurisdiction of a different House Committee, the Committee on Ways and Means, it would have benefited everyone in this room to have heard directly from OWCP so we could have a better understanding of the program.

I look forward to the testimony from all the panelists at today's hearing. I believe we can all work together to create commonsense, workable, and innovative approaches to ensuring miners have a safe and healthy workplace."

###

